

McNamara Statement on Orbital Bomb

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 3—Following is the text of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's statement today on the orbital bomb:

I would like today to discuss with you certain intelligence information we have collected on a series of space system flight tests being conducted by the Soviet Union. These relate to the possible development by the Soviet of something we have called a fractional orbital bombardment system, or FOBS.

Let me distinguish such a system from the traditional intercontinental ballistic missile. An ICBM normally does not go into orbit, but rather follows a ballistic trajectory from launch point to impact point. On this trajectory it reaches a peak altitude of perhaps 800 miles.

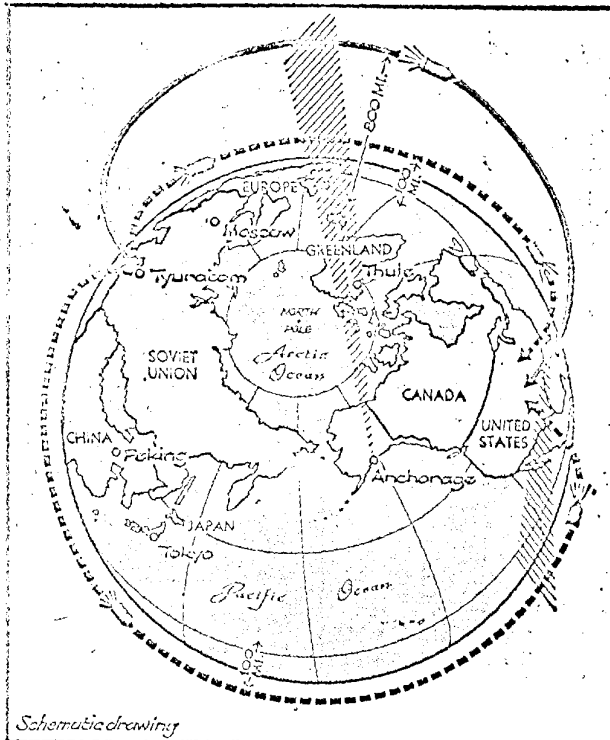
Unlike the ICBM and its ballistic trajectory, the vehicle launched in a FOBS mode is fired into a very low orbit about 100 miles above the earth. At a given point—generally before the first orbit is complete—a rocket engine is fired which slows down the payload and causes it to drop out of orbit. The payload then follows a re-entry path similar to the re-entry of a ballistic missile.

Even now it is impossible to be certain of what these tests represent. It is conceivable that the Soviet Union has been testing space vehicles for some re-entry program. But we suspect that the Russians are pursuing the research and development of a FOBS. If this turns out to be true, it is conceivable that they could achieve an initial operational capability during 1968.

Some years ago we ourselves examined the desirability of the FOBS and there was agreement among civilian and military leaders that there was no need for our country to develop any such system. While development of it could be initiated at any time for relatively rapid deployment, our analyses conclude that it would not improve our strategic offensive posture and consequently we have no intention of revising the decision made years ago.

Like other possible variations, the FOBS offers some characteristics of the FOBS system which differ from traditional ICBM's. In our opinion the disadvantages are overriding.

Because of the low altitude



Schematic drawing

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Path that might be followed by Soviet ICBM directed at United States (black line) is compared above with paths that could be followed by fractional orbital missiles (dashed lines) described by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara. Original American radar warning system was designed to deal with an attack from north, but supplementary radar facilities are being developed in Florida.

of their orbits. Some trajectories of a FOBS would avoid detection by some early warning radars, including our BMEWS [Ballistic Missile Early Warning System]. Also, the impact point cannot be determined until ignition of the rocket engine that deboosts the payload out of orbit—roughly three minutes and 500 miles from the target. And the flight path can be as much as 10 minutes shorter than an ICBM.

For these characteristics, severe penalties are paid in two critical areas—accuracy and payload. The accuracy of the Soviet ICBM modified to a FOBS weapon would be significantly less and the payload of the FOBS vehicle would be but a fraction of the ICBM.

The FOBS weapon would not be accurate enough for a satisfactory attack upon United States Minutemen missiles, protected in their silos. Perhaps the Soviets might feel it could provide a surprise nuclear strike against

United States' soft land targets such as bomber bases.

However, several years ago, anticipating such a capability, we initiated the deployment of equipment to deny them that capability. For example, already we are beginning to use operationally over-the-horizon radars which possess a greater capability of detecting FOBS than do the BMEWS. These will give us more warning time against a full-scale attack using FOBS missiles than BMEWS does against the ICBM launch.

As you know, our deterrent rests upon our ability to absorb any surprise nuclear attack and to retaliate with sufficient strength to destroy the attacking nation as a viable society. With three-minute warning, 15-minute warning or no warning at all, we could still absorb a surprise attack and strike back with sufficient power to destroy the attacker. We have that capability today; we will continue to have it in the future.